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ABSTRACT

Many theorists agree that attention to audience in the act of writing is a very crucial component whether product or process oriented. Audience to the classical rhetorician is an audience to be persuaded, a weak-minded audience that needs someone to direct its thinking to a point of decision. Some high school teachers use this approach as they ask students to analyze the unknown audience so that the student can adapt the discourse to the rhetorical situation accordingly. In the informational perspective situation, the writer's main goal seems to be effective transmission of information to the reader. The main problem with this theory is that it does not allow for creativity in writing. The social perspective theory promotes the idea that all communication is a social act where personal voice must give way to the opinion of the masses or at least to the voices in power. After a teacher has considered these three perspectives regarding the teaching of composition, there needs to be a reconciliation of issues voiced by each perspective. Teachers need to become writers to share the problems of writing with their students; this opens the door to allow real audiences to emerge for the teacher and students. Once students and teachers realize that the best way to develop a sense of audience in writing is through sharing real writing with real audiences, then there will be peace in the writing class. (Eighteen references are attached.) (MG)

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RHETORICAL SITUATIONS:

Peace Talks for the War on Attention to Audience in the Composition Classroom

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Rhetorical Situations:
Peace Talks for the War on Attention to Audience in the Composition Classroom

Have you ever felt like everyone is talking and no one is listening?

Maybe that is one of the reasons why the battle over teaching audience awareness in the composition classroom continues to be waged.

Reading current journals that discuss history, theory, philospsophy and research on the art of teaching composition would probably make any well-meaning high school English teacher think seriously about a career change. Each author has a new theory about the best way to encourage students to consider the element of audience in writing, and some authors even feud with each other about when, where, or how to deal with audience awareness.

What is a teacher to do? Amalgamation of the theories into a single pramatic eclectic approach to teaching seems to be a far greater danger for student writers than confronting the dichotomy. Confronting dichotomy is not an easy task when a high school teacher tries to formulate a workable composition theory.

One means of confronting the dichotomy is to review where the battle started, observe what kind of artillery is being used, and determine what the terms of negotiation are. From this vantage

point, a high school composition teacher is able to become the mediator between theorists and student writers.

Many theorists agree that attention to audience in the act of writing is a very crucial component whether product or process oriented. However, Kroll (1984) infers that theorists are using the same words, but are not speaking the same language. When a classical rhetorician speaks of audience she is not speaking of audience in the same terms that some modern rhetoricians speak.

Using Kroll's three perspectives of audience (rhertorical, informational, and social), we will consider the history (battleground) of each perspective, problems with or possiblities for use of each theory (artillery) in the high school classroom, and a proposal addressing the issue of audience (terms of negotiation) with student writers in a high school classroom.

RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVES

When considering the rhetorical perspective, also known as the traditional perspective, one must begin with the classical rhetoricians. Audience to the classical rhetorician was an audience to be persuaded, a weak-minded audience that needed someone to direct its thinking to a point of decision. In the modern classroom, some teachers use the classical approach as they ask students to analyze the unknown audience so that the student can adapt the discourse to the rhetorical situation accordingly. The question remains: Who is the audience? Every student in a high school classroom where this approach to audience is practiced knows

that the real audience is the teacher no matter how hard the teacher tries to disguise the fact in a writing assignment by generating an imaginary audience. What modern day proponents of this theory ignore is the fact that students read the audience all too well, and fashion writing in such a manner as to persuade or please the teacher. One of the weakenesses of teacher-generated audiences is the fact that students are not really able to analyze an imaginary audience. Ancient rhetoricians addressed their audiences personally, which allowed them to mold the speech based on social interaction. They were able to modify speeches to meet the demands of the listeners. Can a classroom teacher expect a student writer to respond to an unknown audience and remain faithful to Aristotlean audience adaptation?

Another dilemma that faces the student writer in this type of classroom is the idea that all rhetoric is persuasive in nature. How can a teacher expect a student to write persuasively to an unknown audience about such mundane topics as "How I Spent My Summer Vacation", when the student really wants to write a paper about "Why I Hate Writing" to the known audience, the teacher?

Ong (1975), in an essay called "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," claims that all audiences are really fictionalized folks in the minds of the writer. To a high school student searching for voice, everything seems fictitious except the teacher that gives the grade. Peter Elbow (1987), a modern composition theorist, would tell the student to ignore the audience because the awareness of an

audience can confuse or inhibit the writer. Writers call it writer's block. He claims that too much attention to audience can hinder the development of a voice. On the other hand, if a teacher ignores the idea of talking to students about the power of personal voice that can be developed as a result of thinking about and writing to an audience, she runs the risk of thrusting the student unarmed into an adult discourse community that thrives on exalting personal voice by expressing personal opinion about issues at the expense of other less powerful voices on the scene. Attention to audience in the writing classroom gives a student practice using voice, a chance to play with words and manipulate language, a chance to see that others might value her opinion. It also provides a forum to negotiate with other voices who may disagree with her opinion, thereby coming to terms with the fact that all people have a right to express an idea regardless of how contrary that idea might seem.

In the rhetorical perspective, Kroll notes that all writing is considered to be persuasive, leading the writer to believe that all audiences are adversarial. He also argues that a novice writer does not have the life experience to think about an assumed audience, especially an adversarial one. This seems to be a rather naive perspective, since adolescents have been watching, modeling, or mocking human behavior patterns for most of their school life.

Some of the authors of this theory of developing an heuristic to know the personality of the audience have been very instrumental in

composition textbook design. These include such persons as Maxine Hairston, Fred Pfister, and Joanne Petrick.

INFORMATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Another view of audience that Kroll discusses is the informational perspective. In this situation, the writer's main goal seems to be effective transmission of information to the reader, which could be as difficult as putting a square peg in a round hole. This is the basis for using the five paragraph essay as a method of composing. The main problem with the theory is that it does not allow for creativity in writing. It falls under the theme that "Every paragraph must have a topic sentence." Excluding high school textbooks, it would be very unusual to find a paragraph that contained a single topic sentence in any reading. In this particular section of Kroll's essay, the reader found at least two and sometimes four major topics in each of the seven paragraphs.

In order for the theory to work, the student writer would not be able to engage in writing as an exploratory activity for fear that the short and long term memory of the reader would not be able to sort out the main gist of the piece unless each new sentence contained key words from the previous sentence. Most new writers want to get words on the page and make meaning. They do not want to participate in a game of verbal tag by making a new sentence which looks somewhat like the old sentence. Is it the job of the beginning writer to make meaning for the reader or to make meaning for herself first. In principle, this idea may be workable, but a

new writer finds it boring and comes up with comments like "Do we have to write that topic sentence junk today?", or "I don't like to write this way. It's the same old stuff." To combine this formalist philosophy espoused by the ever present Strunk and White where everything has to have order and be correct for meaning to be made with the theory of expressionism used by Ken Macrorie, who believes that freewriting should be used to make meaning for self, could sends mixed messages to students about the way real writers write.

Donald Parks claims that "A text is a kind of drama, with roles created for writer and reader, and the audience is invited to enact the role which has been created for the reader." If this is true, then William Shakespeare's idea `that all the world is a stage, and we are merely actors' is probably the one of the soundest views on audience adaptation that there is. Yet, when is a high school writer allowed to explore audience in this manner? Most essays written by high school English students follow the five paragraph form which allows no room for teasing the audience and no room for humor that pervades Shakespeare's writing in the form of puns. If the teacher presumes to establish an audience for the student by telling the student to write to a neighbor, a friend, or an employer, she also presumes to know more about the real audiences in a student's life than the student does.

E. D. Hirsch claims that an audience is a struggling, active audience that needs cues in order to store data in the short term

memory. The problem with this theory is that every idea must be created as a complete unit with closure so as not to confuse the reader. Many ideas a writer generates are fragmented and evolving ideas that may never come to closure and need to be explored for a lifetime. It also disregards the notion that a writer has the right to let the audience draw conclusions that are contrary to the opinion of the writer.

In his book Constructing Texts, George Dillon believes it is misleading to think that the reader is a "needy reader" who has to have writing molded or pruned in such a ways as to be comprehended with little effort. This approach to making meanings more palpable for the reader can become restrictive to a new writer. Yet, the high school composition teacher struggles with the writer to clean up the meaning by writing such comments as "AWK" or "INCOMPLETE THOUGHT"in the margin of the essay. How can we expect a student to stretch her intellect when she is always writing to a "needy reader"? What happens when she encounters a "wealthy reader" like the teacher who asks her to "explain in greater detail" an idea she does not fully understand herself? Using this model in the writing class disallows the idea of using writing to make meaning, because meaning has already been made. Dialogue is not an important element of learning in the informational perspective camp.

SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

From the social perspective, the battle cry is "decentering". This theory promotes the idea that all communication is a social act

where personal voice must give way to the opinion of the masses or at least to the voices in power. Andrea Lundsford, using Piaget's "centeredness" theory, analyzed a large number of college essays that were egocentrically oriented. This problem with egocentricity is not just a problem for the beginning writer, professional writers, even teachers of composition like Donald Murray, write from a very self-focused view point. In this type of writing class Peter Elbow, would probably be a D student whose essays would be covered with comments like "unclear" or "vague" emblazoned in red across every page.

Can a teacher expect to help a student find personal voice if this social perspective projects a world that is 'other centered' all of the time?

Many high school writing classes are not group response oriented and provide no opportunity for social interaction with a real audience to keep the 'self-centeredness' in check. Therefore, combining this theory with a rhetorical or informational perspective would be comparable to planting seeds on a sidewalk. We cannot expect students to move away from center when our classrooms expect her to perform in isolation.

Anne Ruggles Gere, in a study of three groups of beginning writers, found that peer response groups supply fertile ground for students to share ideas and decenter themselves as they discover that their writing has social implications and can be persuasive or confusing to others. Perhaps more group centered activites within

the writing class will move the beginning writer away from the idea that she is writing in a vacuum where she only hears the sound of her own voice to a position where she can mold a voice that is conversant with, not necessarily subservient to, other voices. As Kenneth Bruffee comments, "Writing is not an inherently private act but is a displaced social act that we perform in private for the sake of convenience."

The dilemma with the group approach to teaching writing is the teacher's own centeredness. While most teachers would give professional assent to the idea of group writing, they fear losing control of the class. This fear occurs because many teachers in secondary schools are isolated from peers because they are generally required to teach alone. Hence, teachers have no sense of learning as a social activity.

The teacher who insists that she have total control over the growth of the student's writing assumes a very self-centered stance because she is really saying, "Do it my way, because it is the right way."

Real writers do not write in a vacuum. Don Freeman, a famous children's writer, would never think of writing a children's book without first consulting with his audience. Once a rough copy of a book is completed, Freeman takes the book to a local library where he shares it with children, his real audience, in a social context. If the children are confused or don't like certain parts of the book, he makes adaptations for the readers. Would Ray Bradbury's

writing be as powerful if he were to send his stories off to a publisher before he shared them with the memebrs of his own writer's group?

A MODERN RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE - A time to negotiate.

After a teacher has considered these three perspectives regarding the teaching of composition, there needs to be a reconciliation of issues voiced by each perspective. Each perspective does discuss the need for attention to audience, an audience which is, for the most part, imaginary. Yet, each agrees that there can and should be real audiences. While considering the weak minds of the rhetorical stance, the empty minds of the informational stance, or the negotiating minds of the social stance, the teacher needs to consider the developing minds of the students.

However, before that, we must consider what we are as teacher-writers. In the January, 1990, issue of English Journal, a teacher named Karen laments the fact that people are chastising her for requiring writing from her students when she is not writing herself. She bemoans the fact that there is no time to write because fifty-five essays sit on her desk waiting to be graded. Are those papers a real hindrance to writing or are they an excuse to avoid the writing we all need to do to sort out life - to make meaning in this complex world of teaching?

It is frightening to think about teaching writing without every having tried the conventions one expects her students to create. How can a teacher share the problems of writing with her students

unless she writes? When a teacher asks students to come up with a theme for a topic, does she share the struggles she has gone through to develop similar ideas? Has she spent hours writing a good opening paragraph for a piece, only to throw it in the trash and start again? Has she ever given someone a piece of her writing to edit? These are deep questions that need to be answered by high school English teachers.

If she does not write herself, then she becomes to the students a fraud. Giving them "worksheets and tests and handouts" is really not teaching writing. Kids know it, parents know it, administrators know it, and probably deep down inside, teachers know that having kids fill out a worksheet is not real writing. Letter writing is real writing. So is an article in the local weekly newspaper about things students are learning in the classroom. Poetry is real writing. Writing about her opinions regarding "Why High School Writing Teachers Should Not Write," is real writing.

The real reason that the grading of those 55 essays is such a deplorable task revolves around the idea that the teacher doesn't feel she has time to write herself and so she has no authentic experience with writing or finding a voice to take to the task of teaching writing.

Becoming a writer can give a teacher perspective about drawing students into what Frank Smith calls the Literacy Club, because it opens the door to allow real audiences to emerge for the teacher and for the students.

PERSPECTIVES ON AUDIENCE

Real audiences can be found everywhere and they are ready to hear the voice of the teacher and the student. Student publications are not the only place students can publish. Writing for the local paper is a great place to start. Students can submit writing to various writing competitions like the PTA Reflections contest sponsored annually by most local PTAs. Setting up a collaborative writing activity between high schoolers and elementary students provides a great audience for both age groups and initiates a social perspective on the effect of audience. Establishing a writing group that allows correspondence with students the same age in another school district about literature is another way to provide real audiences. Once students and teachers realize that the best way to develop a sense of audience in writing is through sharing real writing with real audiences, then, there will be peace in the writing class.

If you listen, you may hear the children singing "Give Peace a Chance."

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